

BOOK REVIEW

ANDY MACKINNON AND JIM POJAR. 2013. **Alpine Plants of the Northwest: Wyoming to Alaska**. (ISBN-13: 978-1-55105-892-4, pbk.). Lone Pine Publishing, 1808 B Street NW, Suite 140, Auburn, Washington 98001, U.S.A. (**Orders:** www.lonepinepublishing.com, order@lonepinepublishing.com, 1-800-518-3541). \$29.95, 528 pp., 5 1/2" × 8 1/2".

Pojar and MacKinnon have created the format for field guides by which all others are measured. *Alpine Plants of the Northwest: Wyoming to Alaska* follows in the footsteps of previous volumes in regard to the content, layout, and presentation. The only shortcoming may be in the breadth of the material. From an ecological perspective, it makes sense to cover a region stretching from far northern Alaska southeast through the Cascade Range and the continental divide to Wyoming. From the perspective of a hiker seeking to balance weight with knowledge, the book may stretch half a continent too far. For an armchair ecologist, however, there is no better guide to the cold-climate plants of the Pacific Northwest.

For a non-technical field guide, the Pojar and MacKinnon books offer a spectacular balance of usability and detailed information on taxonomy. For the truly novice, the book offers a plethora of well-composed photographs. Each portion of a plant that is most distinctive is highlighted as needed, from flowers to leaf shapes to canopy outline for trees. Many guidebooks stop short at one or two photographs of a flower, leaving the user out of luck should the trailside specimen be poor quality. For the more sophisticated user, the Pojar and MacKinnon guides are organized by family with non-technical dichotomous keys emphasizing easily field-discernible characteristics within each section.

The importance of a well-constructed key, organized by easily visible characteristics and supplemented with multiple high-quality photographic illustrations, cannot be overstated. Further, the text description includes significant characteristics that distinguish a taxon from closely related or easily confused groups. Finally, each entry includes a map showing the approximate distribution of the species. Even experienced botanists more familiar with the flora of other ecoregions will find books by Pojar and MacKinnon invaluable.

From a simple physical perspective, the Pojar and MacKinnon guidebooks are constructed of high-quality, water-resistant paper (a necessity in any PNW field guide!). The bindings are sewn, with the anticipation that the guide will be well-thumbed and frequently used. Finally, each book strikes a good balance between page dimensions (larger pages mean more room for photographs) and portability (smaller dimensions mean less space). The weight of the paper adds some heft to the finished product, but this inconvenience is well worth the additional life span of the tome.

Although not so useful for identification, short snippets of ethnobotanical information are included for many plants. This supplemental information on traditional First Nations names and uses for many of the plants, whether edible or medicinal, contributes to the overall sense of each plant species as an element of an ecosystem.

Perhaps the most admirable element of Pojar and MacKinnon's guides is their usefulness to the amateur naturalist looking to learn more about a flora. The approachability and accessibility of the guide makes it very useful to the inexperienced. The more detailed information about flower morphology and the characteristics that distinguish common families in the Pacific Northwest provides an excellent opportunity for the enthusiast to learn the basis by which plants are classified.

As stated initially, the only significant drawback of this guide is its heft for those hikers wishing to cut every ounce, but the breadth of territory covered necessitates a substantial volume. This approach may be desirable from an eco-regional perspective—and from the additional expense that would presumably follow state-specific books. From the perspective of an interested naturalist who values knowledge over convenience, however, there is really no substitute. Aspiring field guide authors from other regions of the US would do well to emulate the Pojar and MacKinnon formula.—*Brian Witte, PhD, Botanical Research Institute of Texas Research Associate, Adjunct Professor of Biology at Collin College, and freelance writer.*